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I Love My Niggas No Homo

Homophobia and the Capitalist Subversion of Violent Masculinity in Hip-Hop

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Abstract: From its beginnings in 1970's New York, hip-hop has offered a cultural outlet for disenfranchised communities across the United States and today commands global influence. However, over the course of its evolution, hip-hop has wrestled with notions of masculinity. As its popularity has increased, so has the violent policing of sexuality and gender roles within the culture. Rereading the commercialization of hip hop as the site of a colonial encounter, with capitalism as the force undergirding its entrance into mainstream American consciousness, implications of the institution of violent masculinity and homophobia become readily apparent. With the rapid popularization of gangsta rap music, homosexuality became a marker of inferiority within the culture that coincided with the emergence of a complicated relationship between hip-hop artists and the sexuality they were sworn to disavow. The effective death of homosexuality as an acceptable erotic encounter within hip-hop culture has resulted in the subconscious development of mourning for its loss: a pathological turmoil enunciated within the most homophobic of hip-hop discourse. Analyzing artists' attempts to fully immerse themselves within this schema of violent masculinity and homophobia allows for the discovery of how this oppressive paradigm can be destroyed from within the genre by those who fully embody these destructive ideologies.

Keywords: homophobia, masculinity, hip-hop

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I can't even partake in that conversation homie. That homo shit? Is that what you talkin' about? I can't even talk to you about that. Cuz...With all due respect, you know what I mean, I ain't trying to offend nobody. My culture...what I represent culturally doesn't condone it whatsoever. Word is bond.¹

Response of rapper Busta Rhymes in a 2006 interview when asked about homophobia within hip-hop

As for homophobia, hip-hop never embraced faggots. One can't deny that there are probably rappers, DJs and fans that are mo's but I think since the culture was based around proving one's manhood, acting like a fruitpop isn't gonna get you anywhere.²

So-called revolutionary rapper Immortal Technique on the relationship between the hip-hop community and homosexuality

Any time you offer a serious critique of the systems of power and privilege, be it compulsory heterosexuality, be it White supremacy, or what have you, you're going to catch some hell. There's no doubt, both within the Black community and the Black church, as well as outside, that I tend to catch hell on this issue. There's no doubt about it. But for me, it's fundamentally a matter of trying to highlight the moral ideals that serve as a basis of the critique of homophobic behavior, heterosexism as a whole, as well as their political consequences. I don't think that one can actually engage in serious talk about the fundamental transformation of American society—that is, the corporate elites, the bank elites, the White supremacists, the male supremacists, as well as the heterosexuals—without talking about hitting the various forms of evil across the board.³

Scholar/activist Cornel West on the necessity of addressing homophobia in the project for social justice

¹ *Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*, dir. Byron Hurt, Public Broadcasting Service, 2006.

² Kyle Myhre, "Conscious Rappers and Homophobia," web log post, *Why Is Guante So Angry?*, 8 Feb. 2007, web, 22 Nov. 2009, <<http://www.guante.info/2007/02/article-conscious-rappers-and.html>>.

³ Cornel West, "Christian Love & Heterosexism," *The Cornel West Reader* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas, 1999) 403.

The Stakes Is High⁴

As an art form created in communities wrought by the devastation of deindustrialization, a racist criminal justice system, and years of social neglect, hip-hop emerged as a mechanism that gave youth of color the opportunity to express themselves on their own terms, devoid of the vicious stereotypes that typically characterized their portrayal by politicians and mainstream media channels. From its inception, hip-hop has been anti-establishment from its graphic lyrical content to its intense imagery or political subject matter that incited thought and action around issues of injustice and oppression. Over time the art form has garnered much attention and respect, catapulting hip-hop to its present-day status as a multi-billion dollar global industry. Rappers have begun building empires around their artistic success, creating exclusive clothing and shoe lines, and signing endorsement deals with alcohol companies, with many venturing into acting and film as a means of bolstering their wealth and status. While hip-hop emerged as an art form comprised of a diversity of images occupying the same cultural space as political critiques and party anthems, its rapid popularization was coupled with a homogenization of narrative style and an intense focus on authenticity around issues of gender and sexuality.

With the emergence of the gangsta rap narrative, hip-hop began a transition from diverse cultural expression to a monolithic display of violence, misogyny, and homophobia. It is important to note that gangsta rap has been valuable in elucidating the level of social injustice perpetrated against youth of color in low-income communities. Songs such as Ice-T's "Cop Killer" and N.W.A.'s "Fuck Tha Police" forced the reality of police brutality into the American consciousness, resulting in many calls for censorship of messages the public did not want to confront. Despite the complicated narratives presented in the early stages of gangsta rap, later hip-hop artists reproduced antiquated views and commentary about homosexuality and gender roles, abandoning insightful political and social commentary.

Much of the dominant discourse on hip-hop's commercialization has focused on issues of "selling out," a paradigm in which artists have forsaken their musical integrity for profit. This reading of hip-hop history produces a binary between artists deemed as "conscious," defined by overtly political lyrics and a disdain for commercial success, and those given the label of "mainstream," accused of forsaking the lineage of resistance and truth telling within hip-hop to attain wealth and fame. Inherently problematic in this characterization of hip-hop is

⁴The section headings used throughout the paper come from various hip-hop lyrics and song titles. Each title was chosen because it best reflected the commentary of each corresponding section.

the failure to recognize that these two seemingly oppositional categories garner their meaning and identity based on the other's existence. What would conscious hip-hop be if it did not have an uncomplicated caricature of narcissistic champagne-popping and diamond-encrusted, grill-wearing rappers to constantly berate through lyrical criticisms of their ignorance and excesses? Conversely, what would mainstream rap be without the looming specter of the "hater" typified by a jealousy of achievement and success it feels is embodied by conscious rap?

Ultimately this categorization overlooks the complexity of artistic production and does little to ameliorate the real problems of corporate control of hip-hop and the music's subsequent lack of diversity. In addition, this binary often privileges conscious hip-hop, deeming it more enlightened and progressive, though many of the artists given this moniker participate in the same oppressive practices of misogyny and homophobia that "mainstream" hip-hop is said to perpetuate. This raises an important question and the overall focus of this article: What does it mean for hip-hop—a culture born with the express purpose of providing a creative outlet for marginalized communities, people, and identities—to engage in the same discriminatory practices that led to its formation?

While hip-hop has attained visibility throughout the world, becoming a staple in pop culture, success came at a price. Record companies began privileging narratives of violence, homophobia, and misogyny, dominating the hip-hop industry with this limited voice of the culture. The record labels offered little to no support to artists who represented more complex notions of masculinity than the image of heteronormativity and homophobia; consequently, these values became normalized, acting as a standard for authenticity. Violent homophobia and the constant affirmation of masculinity became a means of attaining the vaunted label of "authentic" and securing a level of respect and recognition in the culture. The death of homosexuality as a culturally acceptable erotic encounter within hip-hop has engendered a curious relationship between the genre and a sexuality artists are forced to explicitly reject and vilify. Between the lines of homophobic lyrical boasts, an emergence of homoeroticism has occurred, indicative of a "melancholic" desire for the homosexual other within. This trend illustrates the unforeseen consequences of a capitalist inculcation of heteronormativity with a pathological turmoil being enunciated within the culture as a result of its institution. Embedded within the most homophobic hip-hop discourse is a rhetoric for change, one in which a more complex masculinity can be articulated and a progressive hip-hop community can be constructed, undermining the capitalist desire for hypermasculine imagery using the ideological tools its commercialization has afforded the culture.

Never Thought That Hip-Hop Would Take It This Far

The early 1990s saw hip-hop transform from a culture that escaped the attention of most outside the locus of its formation to a genre of music at the center of American pop culture. While record companies had previously glossed over hip-hop, deeming it a genre of negligible commercial viability that captured the attention solely of those who participated in it, hip-hop quickly became a lucrative cultural commodity with an endless number of marketing schemes to maximize its profitability. While some welcomed this step into the national spotlight, it would have an indelible impact on the music, leaving hip-hop subject to the whims of market forces and consumer choice.

The notion of hip-hop's commercial viability emerged with the creation of Soundscan, a drastic shift in the way music sales were measured. Soundscan allowed for electronic monitoring of record sales, cataloguing sales immediately upon purchase and wiring the data to a central database for compilation and assessment. *Billboard*, regarded as the pre-eminent expert on music, switched to the Soundscan system in the calculation of its weekly rankings of music sales and popularity in the United States.⁵ Hip-hop historian S. Craig Watkins cites the institution of Soundscan as a pivotal moment for hip-hop culture that ensured its entrance into the mainstream American consciousness. In June 1991, within only four weeks of adopting the Soundscan point-of-sales reporting system, gangsta rap group N.W.A. (Niggaz Wit Attitude) became *Billboard's* top-selling artist in the country with the release of their album *Efil4zaggin* (Niggaz4Life backwards), turning the "conventional wisdom" of the music industry "on its head."⁶ As hip-hop album sales rivaled those of established pop icon Michael Jackson, record executives realized that hip-hop was more than a cultural phenomenon and was on its way to becoming a profitable commodity.

The recognition of hip-hop as a viable commercial entity led record labels to begin the furious process of staking territory within the genre. In the 1980s, "a thriving network of independent regional distributors...and labels" existed with sales that rivaled those of large corporate operations, but the success of artists like N.W.A. would quickly bring this era to an end.⁷ As a result of corporate interest in hip-hop, by the end of 1996, no independently owned national distributor existed, and soon after, independent labels were forced to either "cut deals

⁵ S. Craig Watkins, *Hip-hop Matters: Politics, Popular Culture and the Struggle for the Soul of a Movement* (New York: Beacon, 2005) 94.

⁶ Watkins 95.

⁷ Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2005) 444.

with major distributors” or leave the market entirely.⁸ Having consolidated power and control of hip-hop ownership, companies began to support only the most profitable narrative that hip-hop had to offer: gangsta rap. While in the past, corporations were pleased with their relatively large returns on small investments in the music, the 1990s saw the music industry “place bigger bets on fewer projects in the hopes of bigger payoffs,” resulting in a “steady narrowing of voices” and a reduction in the diversity of music available to consumers.⁹ In the wake of this investment, hip-hop artists were pressured to respond to the demands of the burgeoning industry in exchange for their survival.

Coupled with the popularization of hip-hop was a rigidity of identity that became instituted in the culture of the music. While Soundscan technology may finally have given hip-hop the recognition and respect it deserved, its shift from a genre outside mainstream media channels to one included within that market was accompanied by a proliferation of content regulation within the music, forcing artists to adhere to a new standard of violent masculinity. Entry into the mainstream would seem to signal an increase in industry space for hip-hop expression but instead repressed artistic autonomy and creativity. Record labels began touting “market research” that showed demand for more severe lyrics as justification for the promotion of gangsta rap.¹⁰ Making gangsta rap so commercially successful was its resonance with pre-existing images and stereotypes of inner-city life as rife with violence, drug addiction, and lawlessness.

Connecting the desire for harsher lyrics with hip-hop’s emergence as a commodity, the role of the white gaze must not be overlooked as a root cause of a shift in musical content. Increasing access to a national spotlight brought hip-hop into the everyday lives of White America and the consumer power this demographic wields, making hip-hop subject to its consumption habits. Theorist Bill Yousman discusses the concept of spectacular consumption in which portrayals of “authentic” black life are converted into a product that “Whites can purchase in the mass mediated marketplace.”¹¹ He argues that the reality of life is irrelevant, superseded by a façade of “authenticity” that is measured relative to cultural expectations of violent, aggressive, and criminal inner-city youth of color.¹² This phenomenon is illustrated in the 2006 documentary *Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes* during an interview about hip-hop with four

⁸ Chang 444.

⁹ Chang 445.

¹⁰ Jon Pareles, “POP VIEW; Gangster Rap: Life and Music in the Combat Zone,” *New York Times* 7 Oct. 1990.

¹¹ Bill Yousman, “Blackophilia and Blackophobia: White Youth, the Consumption of Rap Music, and White Supremacy,” *Communication Theory* 13.4 (2003): 366-91.

¹² Yousman 378.

white youths in the predominantly white town of Moline, Illinois. When filmmaker Byron Hurt asks the group about their interest in hip-hop, the youths speak of the genre as an opportunity to peer into “a different culture” speaking with fascination about drive-by shootings and other violence they “never had the opportunity to experience.”¹³ Describing narratives of poverty and oppression as though they were part of an exclusive internship program, the words of these white youths represent a desire for engagement with the perceived realities of urban life, an ideology that contributed to a complete cultural shift within hip-hop. Gone were the complicated constructions of masculinity as represented by A Tribe Called Quest and De La Soul, replaced with gritty narratives of street life with shock value intended to incite consumption (see Figure 1). Industry-supported hip-hop all but disowned diverse musical sampling, ruminations about relationship insecurity and angst, and any other topic that threatened the edifice of masculinity.



Figure 1. Two Album Covers Illustrate the Evolution of Hip-hop Masculinity. De La Soul's 1989 album "3 Feet High and Rising"¹⁴ (pictured left) and 50 Cent's 2005 release "The Massacre"¹⁵ are examples of a transition in the representation of masculinity within hip-hop. Note the increased emphasis on physicality and violence represented in the caricature of 50 Cent and the album title, respectively.

Get Rich or Die Tryin'

Rereading the commercialization of hip-hop as a colonial encounter, a process that resulted in the institution of homophobic and hypermasculine standards within the culture, allows for the employment of the theory of mimicry and the re-articulation of the relationship between capitalism and hip-hop. In the essay "Of Mimicry and Man," post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha introduces the idea of mimicry as a means of understanding the complex set

¹³ *Hip-hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes*.

¹⁴ De La Soul, *3 Feet High and Rising*, CD, Warner, 1989.

¹⁵ 50 Cent, *The Massacre*, CD, Shady/Aftermath/Interscope Records, 2005.

of interactions that constitute the relationship between colonized peoples and the colonizer. Bhabha defines colonial mimicry as a process with the goal of creating a “reformed, recognizable Other” that will reproduce colonial ideology and subservience to colonial authority through a façade of difference.¹⁶ Bhabha uses the example of Indian subjugation by British colonial authority during the nineteenth century to explain how mimicry emerges in the colonial context. Fearful of the insurrection that could result from a complete inculcation of British values and religious doctrine into Indian society, the British instead advocated for the “partial diffusion of Christianity” and “influence of moral improvements” to create a “particularly appropriate form of colonial subjectivity” in India.¹⁷ Ensuring that the doctrines being disseminated operated within India’s existing factious caste system, the products of this process were “authorized versions of otherness” that replicated colonial ideology but occupied bodies of the oppressed.¹⁸ Applying this theory to hip-hop’s rapid commercialization, the encounter between hip-hop culture and capitalism becomes one marked by colonial mimicry.

According to Bhabha, the British were aware that the expansion of commercial ventures in India required “a reform of manners” that would result in Indian people gaining “a sense of personal identity as we know it.”¹⁹ The motivation for wealth and control undergirded Britain’s actions, causing it to institute models of acceptable identity within Indian society as a means for increasing business. In the same vein, with capitalism occupying the role of colonizer, hip-hop culture was reformed and regulated, and the façade of violent masculinity became essential to maintaining an image of authenticity.

Prompting this move was the recognition that gangsta rap was a lucrative music, reifying elements of urban life that would reap massive profits if properly packaged. With studies and surveys such as one conducted in 1992 claiming 74 percent of the rap sold in the first half of the year was purchased by white consumers, companies recognized how critical the marketing of artists would be to maximizing profits.²⁰ Capitalism played an intermediary role between the depictions of urban decay, violence, and masculinity as expressed by gangsta rap artists and the ravenous appetite of a white audience eager to consume those images. While the capitalist motives of the music industry did not create the gangsta rap narrative, they certainly instituted a cultural standard, forcing artists to live up to the violently masculine and homophob-

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha, “Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,” *October* 28 (1984): 126.

¹⁷ Bhabha 127.

¹⁸ Bhabha 128.

¹⁹ Bhabha 128.

²⁰ Clarence Lusane, “Rap, Race and Politics,” *Race and Class* 35.1 (1993): 44.

bic rhetoric the music expresses. This pressure to conform to a rigid masculinity has had a profound impact on hip-hop culture and manifests itself in curious ways, simultaneously enacting the homosexual desire it claims to reject.

Murder [Homosexuality] Was the Case That They Gave Me

With increased financial support for a limited number of artists, diverse representations of masculinity all but disappeared from hip-hop by the end of the 1990s. Privileging the de-politicized narratives of urban strife, record companies placed violent masculinity at the forefront of commercial hip-hop music. Authenticity became “increasingly...linked to masculinity in its most patriarchal significations,” with respect and material success afforded to artists who perpetuated an image of infallibility.²¹ This hypermasculine posturing was rooted in heteronormative ideology, which regarded homosexuality as a sign of weakness that contradicted the hardcore image the industry wanted artists to reproduce for commercial viability. While homophobia was undoubtedly existent within hip-hop culture before its emergence as a profitable commodity, the violent policing of gender roles and sexual behavior did in fact coincide with the commercialization of the genre.

To better understand what is embedded within this homophobic hip-hop discourse, the fierce institution of heteronormative standards must be reread as the death or loss of a potential love-object within the culture. In other words, artists both incessantly reaffirm their heterosexuality through lyrical boasts of sexual promiscuity and deny all possibility of an acceptable erotic encounter between artists of the same gender. Sigmund Freud articulates mourning and melancholia as the two primary responses to the loss of a love-object. Where mourning is a conscious recognition of the loss, melancholia is a “pathological mourning” in which the “object itself is given up” but “love for the object” cannot be sacrificed.²² Freud argues that melancholia is an unconscious internalization of loss that complicates the relationship between the lost love-object and the person experiencing the loss. Freud describes the melancholic relationship as tenuous, characterized by “countless single conflicts in which love and hate wrestle together,” moving between upholding the love-object and repudiating it entirely.²³

²¹ Patrick E. Johnson, “The Specter of the Black Fag: Parody, Blackness and Hetero/Homosexual B(r)others,” *Queer Theory and Communication: From Disciplining Queers to Queering the Discipline(s)*, ed. Gust A. Yep, Karen E. Lovaas, and John P. Elia (New York: Harrington Park, 2003) 218.

²² Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Freud Reader*, ed. Peter Gay (Boston: W.W. Norton & Company, 1995) 588.

²³ Freud 587.

Relating this to the construction of sexuality, Judith Butler builds on Freudian theory to argue that the construction of heterosexual identity is premised on this melancholic process. Butler ties gender and sexual identity together explaining that “gender is achieved and stabilized through the accomplishment of heterosexual positioning,” making anything outside of that a “threat to gender itself.”²⁴ In this process, erotic encounters between those of the same gender are prohibited, subjecting heterosexuality to the loss of a love-object. Homosexuality, however, is not destroyed; it is, in fact, necessary to the construction of heterosexuality. The maintenance of heterosexuality is founded on a homosexuality that is seen as prohibited, existing at the margins of society, and must be guarded against. Butler coins the term “heterosexual melancholy” to describe how “masculine gender” is constructed through the “refusal to grieve the masculine as a possibility of love.”²⁵ Homophobia can be seen as inherently connected to this melancholic process by resurfacing the turmoil that Freud believes characterizes the relationship between the lost love-object (erotic same-sex encounters) and the subject of that loss (heterosexuals). Employing this theory to analyze the “intensity of homophobia” in the black community, Patrick Johnson posits that “love or nostalgia” for the lost love-object is often accompanied by an element of hatred because “the melancholic receives gratification from such sadism directed toward the Other-within” as a result of its “ambivalence toward the newly introjected love object” of heterosexuality.²⁶ Manifesting itself in a number of contradictory ways, homophobia within the hip-hop community can be reread as a site of ongoing turmoil over the loss of homosexuality as an acceptable form of erotic engagement.

Dumb It Down

The ramifications of this cultural shift toward the embrace of a violent masculinity are exemplified through antagonistic lyrics and attitudes towards homosexuality within hip-hop. The career of Busta Rhymes, a hip-hop artist who emerged in the 1990s, illustrates the correlation between a transforming music landscape and the manifestation of homophobia and violent masculinity within hip-hop. Busta Rhymes catapulted himself into the hip-hop industry in the early- to mid- 1990s by way of several famous “cameo appearances” on songs by established artists, culminating with his contribution to A Tribe Called Quest on the hip-hop classic

²⁴ Judith Butler, “Melancholy Gender-Refused Identification,” *Gender in Psychoanalytic Space: Between Clinic and Culture (Contemporary Theory)* (New York: Other, 2002) 6.

²⁵ Butler 16.

²⁶ Johnson 219.

“Scenario.”²⁷ Busta Rhymes quickly distinguished himself from his rap peers by invoking the performative flair of 1970s funk artist George Clinton “with smoke, lights, pyrotechnics and an endless variety of freaky outfits” that challenged the “gangsta” aesthetic that was rapidly being normalized during the time of his ascension to fame within hip-hop culture.²⁸ Busta Rhymes offered a creative reinterpretation of 1970s party music infused with powerful enunciations of his Islamic faith, taking the emphasis away from the construction of a violent masculinity that was becoming central to the artistry of contemporaries around him. In a 1996 interview with the *Washington Post*, Busta Rhymes discussed the tense culture of violence being developed within hip-hop:

I ain’t really about reflecting one subject in particular all the time. The universe consists of limitless and endless elements that we don’t even acknowledge because we don’t even know how. And I just try to take the music there because my mind goes there. We’re all living in the same society structure regardless of if you’re on the West Coast and I’m on the East Coast.²⁹

Here, Busta Rhymes is referring to the violent schism between East and West Coast artists that characterized 1990s hip-hop and resulted in the death of The Notorious B.I.G. and Tupac Shakur, rappers of these respective regions embroiled in the conflict. While Busta Rhymes espouses a perspective of unity and inclusion, his sentiments of peaceful coexistence would be short-lived, soon succumbing to the culture of an industry rapidly changing around him.

Though Busta Rhymes built a moderately successful rap career while signed under J Records, it was his departure to join Aftermath Records that resulted in both his widespread success and a radical reshaping of his masculinity. At Aftermath, Rhymes found himself under the guidance of rapper and producer Dr. Dre, a member of the aforementioned gangsta rap group N.W.A., who had attained much fame and wealth through the promotion of the violent masculinity celebrated within his music. In a 2006 interview with *Vibe Magazine*, Rhymes hints at the new direction of his image and music after his record label transition:

LL Cool J recently told me you can’t expect new results when you do the same things. So after six solo albums I might as well try Dr. Dre’s way.³⁰

²⁷ Ester Iverem, “Busta Moves: The Rapper Goes From the ‘70s to the Top 10,” *The Washington Post* 5 May 1996, final ed.: arts sec.

²⁸ Iverem.

²⁹ Iverem.

³⁰ Cheo H. Coker, “Busta Rhymes: Mouth Almighty,” *Vibe Magazine* June 2006.

The article goes on to explain “Dr. Dre’s way”:

Meet the “new” Busta Rhymes. The one he wants you to see: The guy with the chiseled body and harder attitude, the flossed-out MC who casually wears a half-million dollars worth of jewelry at any given time, the radical rapper who shaved the hair he’s been growing since 1989 and repackaged himself anew.³¹

Choosing to shave his iconic dreads, cease his creative engagement with 1970s funk, and develop an incredibly muscular physique culminated in the 2006 release and subsequent success of *The Big Bang*, the first album of his career to debut at number one. The embrace of the normative hypermasculine gangsta hip-hop aesthetic from which he had formerly distanced himself brought Busta Rhymes much commercial success, allowing the colonial force of a capitalist music industry to market his artistry in the most profitable manner possible (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Images of Busta Rhymes between 1997 and 2006.

Busta Rhymes (left) seemingly less concerned with a hardcore image is pictured at the 1997 MTV Music Video Awards with Martha Stewart.³² Above (center) are scenes from Busta Rhymes’ 1998 music video Gimme Some More,³³ exemplifying the comedic and playful nature of his music production earlier in his career. Busta Rhymes (right) is pictured in the June 2006 issue of “Vibe Magazine.”³⁴ Note the change in physique between 1997 and 2006.

³¹ Coker.

³² Bill Davilla, *Odd Couple*, photograph, New York, 1997.

³³ *Put Your Hands Where My Eyes Can See*, dir. Hype Williams, perf. Busta Rhymes, J-Records, 1998.

³⁴ Coker.

The transformation of Busta Rhymes illustrates the turmoil within hip-hop regarding its relationship to homosexuality. Reverberations of Busta Rhymes's newfound masculinity were felt beyond the borders of his music, as his homophobic lyrics became actualized in the form of violence.

In 2006, the same year he signed with Dr. Dre and Aftermath records, Busta Rhymes was involved in an altercation with a gay fan while at a restaurant. After the fan approached the rapper to "congratulate [him] on his recent comeback" from a shooting that had occurred a month earlier, Busta Rhymes exploded into a tirade: "Why the fuck you touchin me, man? Get the fuck away from me! I hate fucking faggots, man."³⁵ As Busta Rhymes was attempting to transform the masculinity presented within his music, the homophobia of that newfound image became embodied in his actions. Rhymes continued to display his disdain for homosexuality in divorce proceedings with Joanne Wood, the mother of his three children. Citing a lack of personal time together brought on by her husband's music career and touring schedule, Wood left Busta Rhymes. Immediately thereafter she established a relationship with another woman,³⁶ enraging Busta Rhymes and prompting him to state the following about the divorce proceedings in the aforementioned 2006 *Vibe Magazine* article:

It's ill when you have to go on TV and smile, but earlier you were in the court getting shitted on by your baby's mother and a lesbian man-looking bitch holding your child in her arms, talking about she gonna replace you as the father looking like a dude in a three-piece suit.³⁷

Embedded within the newfound construction of masculinity, Busta Rhymes embodies a prohibition of same-sex erotic encounters because, as Judith Butler explains, homosexuality is a menace "to gender identity itself" as masculinity is created through "successful heterosexual positioning."³⁸ In examining this instance as an act of "sadism" directed towards the lost and prohibited love-object of homosexuality, we can see that the "melancholic longing" of Busta Rhymes derives satisfaction from a repudiation of it as a means of dealing with its absence.³⁹ Furthermore, being that his own wife left him to engage in a homosexual relationship, which

³⁵ Jasmyne A. Cannick, "Hip-hop's Homophobia and Black Gay America's Silence," *Pridesource.com*, Pride Source Media Group, 20 Apr. 2006, 10 Nov. 2009 <<http://www.pridesource.com/article.html?article=18369>>.

³⁶ Keith Boykin, "More of Busta's Homophobic Nonsense," 27 Jun. 2006, web, 20 Oct. 2009 <http://www.keithboykin.com/arch/2006/06/27/more_of_bustas>.

³⁷ Coker.

³⁸ Butler 6.

³⁹ Johnson 219.

the very construction of his own masculinity disallows him from participating in, jealousy of her actions may account for the virulent level of homophobia Busta Rhymes displayed in the divorce process. While Busta Rhymes is an excellent example of how the institution of a violent masculinity and homophobia has affected hip-hop culture and artistry, the contradictory manifestations of these oppressive ideologies offer a path toward increased liberatory sexual expression within the music.

It Ain't No Fun if the Homies Can't Have None

Much of the masculine posturing within hip-hop is premised on an image of the artists' sexual infallibility. Rappers are depicted as sexual beasts, exerting sexual authority and control over women and thus commanding the respect of their male peers. Interestingly, rappers make constant references to other men when describing sexual encounters with women. For example, the title of Snoop Doggy Dogg's 1993 debut album, *Doggystyle*, is an allusion to the "doggy style" sexual position in which women are on their hands and knees facing the opposite direction of their male sexual partner who proceeds to enter them from behind. The "doggy style" sexual position is incessantly referenced throughout the album and within subsequent work by Snoop Dogg as representative of the subordinate status women occupy in his music. The album cover itself represents the desire for multiple men to be a part of the erotic encounter. It depicts a cartoon image of a female dog entering a dog house, presumably that of Snoop, on all fours replicating the doggy-style position, with another dog (Snoop himself) reaching for her tail (see Figure 3). Of note are the three other dogs in the picture intently focused on Snoop's pursuit of the female dog, discussing the merits of chasing female dogs (women) and concluding that it is "nuttin but da dog" within them that drives their actions. In this scene we can see that the dogs, meant to stand in for real men, are speaking of their attraction as though it were tragic, lamenting their predicament and implying it is not ideal.

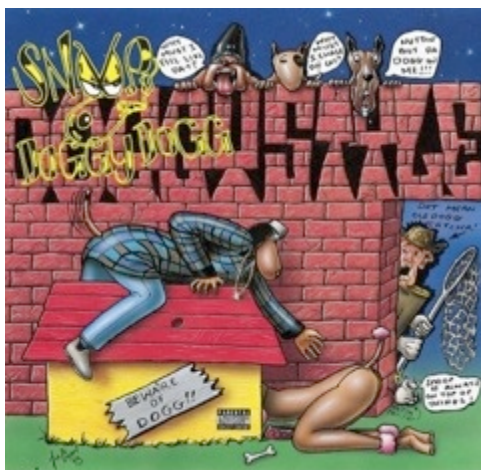


Figure 3. Album Cover of Snoop Doggy Dogg's 1993 Release "Doggystyle."
*Note the three male dogs (pictured on top of the dog house) and the male dog catcher watching Snoop Dogg attempt to catch the female dog.*⁴⁰

One of the most popular songs on the album is the track "It Ain't No Fun (If the Homies Can't Have None)," an ode to Snoop Dogg's superior sexual prowess and the lack of respect he and his close friends exhibit toward female sexual partners. The title of the song "It Ain't No Fun" indicates that sexual pleasure is inherently linked to masculine involvement in the process.

Snoop, in unison with record label mates Warren G and Kurupt, lyrically express the impossibility of any care or concern for the women they pursue, taking every opportunity to denigrate women's characters and reserve any meaningful social connection and intimacy for their male counterparts. The following is a portion of Kurupt's verse:

I now the pussy's mines,
I'm a fuck a couple more times,
And then I'm through with it,
There's nothing else to do with it
Pass it to the homie,
Now you hit it,
Cause she ain't nuthin but a bitch to me,
And y'all know that bitches ain't shit to me.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Snoop Doggy Dogg, *Doggystyle*, CD, Death Row/ Koch, 1993.

⁴¹ Snoop Doggy Dogg featuring Kurupt and Nate Dogg, "It Ain't No Fun (If the Homies Can't Have None)," *Doggystyle*, CD, Death Row/ Koch, 1993.

In the above verse, Kurupt viciously maligns women as nothing more than objects of his sexual desire. Even in this limited capacity, it is clear that he ascribes no value to individual women, later in the verse declaring to a non-specific “hoe” that she will “never be [his] only one” and ending his portion of the song with the sexist slur, “bitch,” to further elucidate his point.⁴² The few displays of respect and care exhibited within the entirety of the song are between men. For example, after Kurupt is finished with what he deems to be the only meaningful encounter possible between himself and a woman, he decides to “pass [the woman] to the homie.”⁴³ In this transition between disgust for the feminine and an involvement of the masculine in the erotic encounter, the ambivalence that characterizes the melancholic process is being vocalized. Though his “homie” is culturally prohibited from being the object of his sexual desire, Kurupt uses misogyny as a tool to enable the participation of other men in the erotic encounter. Snoop Dogg reiterates this melancholic longing, proclaiming that sex “ain’t no fun if my homies can’t get a taste of it,” thereby emphasizing that multiple men must be involved in the erotic encounter for pleasure to be experienced.⁴⁴

Doggystyle is one of many examples illustrating the discord that resides within a hip-hop hypermasculinity that consistently evokes the specter of a prohibited homosexuality as a result of its melancholic longing for an erotic same-sex experience. Oft cited as one of the most repulsive displays of misogyny and sexism within hip-hop, the song “Tip Drill” by rapper Nelly represents another blatant manifestation of this melancholic longing. *Tip drill* refers to a basketball exercise in which players line up and attempt to tip a basketball against the backboard consecutively without the ball hitting the ground. In this instance, Nelly and the St. Lunatics (his rap clique/posse) use the term as slang to describe multiple men taking turns and having sex with one woman. The video encapsulates the sexist imagery that has come to characterize hip-hop culture: numerous scantily clad women dancing and performing for hordes of men who shower them with money and champagne. Invoking the spirit of Snoop Dogg’s seminal work, Nelly and the St. Lunatics proclaim that sex “ain’t no fun unless *we* all get some,” using the phrase as a chorus and chanting the words in unison over the course of the song.⁴⁵ Analyzing the discourse within this song through the frame of melancholic mourning enables a drastic rereading of what is meant by the “some” that Nelly and his companions so desperately seek. Resurfacing in the music video is the “some” being referenced in the chorus:

⁴² Snoop Doggy Dogg featuring Kurupt and Nate Dogg.

⁴³ Snoop Doggy Dogg featuring Kurupt and Nate Dogg.

⁴⁴ Snoop Doggy Dogg featuring Kurupt and Nate Dogg.

⁴⁵ Nelly & the St. Lunatics, “Tip Drill,” single, David Banner, 2003. Emphasis added.

the desire for multiple men to be a part of the sexual encounter, with much emphasis placed on men cosigning derogatory actions against women in various scenes. As Michael Kimmel explains, “masculinity is a *homosocial* enactment” but beyond that, within the Nelly video it proves to be a site of safe and unchallenged masculine erotic engagement.⁴⁶ Instances in which women are demeaned serve as a mechanism to bring men together during sexual acts in a manner that evades accusations of any perceived homosexuality and allows male rappers to erotically connect with the masculine love-object they have been prohibited from engaging with intimately.

At one point in the video, a particularly abhorrent scene develops in which Nelly slides a credit card down the backside and between the buttocks of a female dancer. As Nelly does this, to his right a male videographer is documenting the entire process, and in the background several men are watching with fascination. This example shows that the “introjected love object” that hip-hop “reviles” is that of heterosexuality.⁴⁷ With this in mind, the violent and denigrating acts committed against women in the video become expressions of that anger. Aggressive throwing of money at women’s backsides and abusive handling of the female body can be reread as an act of collective catharsis, with sadism directed at women as a means of easing pain, anger, and anguish regarding the inability to be intimate with their fellow male St. Lunatics. While Snoop Doggy Dogg and Nelly illustrate how this melancholic desire manifests itself, embedded in affirmations of masculinity and heterosexuality predicated on female subordination, forces within hip-hop culture do portend the possibility of various modes of subverting this violent process and ultimately transforming hip-hop and ridding the culture of the destructive ideology reinforced by capitalism.

Why You Tryin’ to Be Hardcore, You Fuckin’ Homo-Thug?

As a result of the virulent homophobia and masculine posturing within hip-hop, powerful critiques have emerged as a means of holding artists accountable for the work they produce and the ideologies they perpetuate. By denouncing only artists and not confronting a culture dictated by the profit incentives of capitalism, these critiques solely advocate inclusion and acceptance without challenging the oppressive ideologies of homophobia, violent masculinity, and misogyny. For example, Caushun, a rapper unsuccessfully marketed as a “homo

⁴⁶ Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” *Race, Class and Gender in the United States: An Integrated Study*, ed. Paula S. Rothenberg (New York: Worth Publishers, 2003) 87.

⁴⁷ Johnson 219.

thug,” embodies the struggle to be merely included within the culture and not disrupt repressive hip-hop standards. Current constructs of authentic identity disallowed the realization of his success.

As discussed previously, the capitalist impetus that drives the production of contemporary hip-hop has privileged the gangsta narrative that embodies the violent masculine standards most conducive to commercial success. At the core of authenticity within hip-hop is the notion of a heterosexual male dominance that presides over women and repeatedly repudiates homosexuality and anything deemed effeminate. Rapper Caushun claims that he is “keeping it real” by proudly projecting his gay identity and not attempting to “play it straight,” validating his narrative with a sense of truth.⁴⁸ Problematic to this interpretation is the fact that within hip-hop, achieving the title of “keepin’ it real” and “authentic” involves far more than “proclaiming a core identity.”⁴⁹ Authenticity is wrapped up in an aesthetic that an openly gay rapper is unable to produce under the standards constructed by capitalism. Scholars Robin Coleman and Jasmine Cobb articulate the dilemma of Caushun’s identity: “Though Caushun is true to his lyrics, ‘come up out that closet, let the truth set you free,’ by being honest about his own sexuality, authenticity will never be solely his to define.”⁵⁰

Before Caushun had the opportunity to exhibit lyrical skills, an aggressive persona, and establish himself as a legitimate force within hip-hop, his sexuality immediately undermined the credibility necessary to succeed within hip-hop. Because he occupies a sexuality that directly conflicts with the masculinity hip-hop espouses, he poses a threat to the capitalist schema that has created this standard as a means for attaining respect, success, and wealth.

The gay hip-hop movement, though small, does offer valuable critiques and representations of masculinity not seen within other forms of hip-hop.⁵¹ Equally imperative is the recognition that multiple strategies for progressing hip-hop must be employed, including methods that seek to recognize the “homo” that already exists within the music.

⁴⁸ Robin R. Means Coleman and Jasmine Cobb, “No Way of Seeing: Mainstreaming and Selling the Gaze of Homo-Thug Hip-Hop,” *Popular Communication: The International Journal of Media and Culture* 5.2 (2007): 95.

⁴⁹ Means Coleman and Cobb 95.

⁵⁰ Means Coleman and Cobb 95.

⁵¹ Many artists are attempting to break the hypermasculine paradigm that has been established within hip-hop culture by creating alternative modes of artistic expression that challenge these cultural norms. The purpose of highlighting the ineffectiveness of the homo-hop movement and other attempts to re-articulate cultural standards within hip-hop from outside the existing standards is not to belittle or diminish their importance. Rather, the purpose is to establish that these efforts must complement one another to effectively combat the repressive standards of sexuality that regulate artistic production in hip-hop culture.

I Love My Niggas No Homo

Returning to the idea of mimicry, the process of colonization results in the colonized embodying a “partial presence” of the “authoritative discourse.”⁵² As a result of this, Bhabha claims that an “ambivalence” develops in which the “civilizing mission is threatened by the gaze of its disciplinary double” making mimicry both “resemblance and menace.”⁵³ Within this theory, Bhabha is articulating a subversive rhetoric embedded within the process of colonial indoctrination that threatens colonial authority precisely at the site of its reproduction. In creating “authorized versions of otherness,” the process of colonization creates a subject that “shares the acuity of the genealogical gaze” of the colonizer and is a “menace [to] the narcissistic demand of colonial authority.”⁵⁴ This complication of the colonial encounter offers a promising sign towards disrupting the repressive relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Despite the institution of hypermasculine standards within hip-hop culture as a barometer for success, the music produced by artists provides a site of ceaseless redefinition of the very standards by which they are judged. Exemplary of this subversive potential within hip-hop is rapper Lil’ Wayne, one of the most prolific and popular artists in the genre.

As evidenced within the aforementioned hip-hop songs, categories and constructions of identity invariably leak as their meanings and structure are artificial. While much of Lil’ Wayne’s rhetoric and image remain entrenched in a capitalist schema of hypermasculinity, homophobia, and violent misogyny, signs point to a more complicated understanding of his artistry. For example, in 2006 a picture of Lil’ Wayne surfaced in which he is depicted kissing rapper Birdman, the man who discovered his talents at the age of eleven, served as a mentor for the rapper, and subsequently lead him to stardom (see Figure 3).⁵⁵

⁵² Bhabha 127.

⁵³ Bhabha 127.

⁵⁴ Bhabha 129.

⁵⁵ Sasha Frere-Jones, “High and Mighty: Lil’ Wayne Takes Over Hip-hop,” *The New Yorker* 13 Aug. 2007.



Figure. 3. Lil' Wayne (left) Kissing His Mentor and Labelmate Birdman.⁵⁶

An ensuing controversy led Lil' Wayne to record a verse on the mixtape remix track to “We Takin Over” to respond to claims of his alleged homosexuality. Though the core of his authenticity—his sexuality and masculinity—were both attacked, he was not apologetic and unabashedly affirmed that he kissed Birdman, whom he affectionately refers to as his “daddy.” The following is an excerpt from his verse:

Damn right I kissed my daddy,
I think they pissed at how rich my daddy is,
And I'm his kid I stunt with my daddy,
So diss me and don't diss my daddy,
Cause who was there when no one wasn't? Just my daddy,
Who was there when I needed money? Just my daddy,
So who'll be there when I see the money? Just my daddy,
Who said that I'd be the one? Just my daddy!⁵⁷

This verse is a departure from normative responses to confrontations with homosexuality in hip-hop as embodied by Busta Rhymes's violently homophobic tirades. Lil' Wayne does not simply dismiss the accusations of homosexuality or the close nature of the relationship between himself and Birdman but instead consecrates and affirms it, defending its validity and substance. The song goes on to fortify Lil' Wayne's masculine image by defiantly pronouncing the fear he instills in other men and the murders he commits in a nonchalant manner. We can see mimicry and the production of “its slippage [and] its excess” in his description of the relationship between himself and Birdman.⁵⁸ When commenting on who would say he was “the

⁵⁶ Gillie Tha Kid, *Baby Kissing Lil' Wayne*, photograph, New Orleans, 2006.

⁵⁷ Lil' Wayne, “We Takin Over (Remix),” *Da Drought 3*, CD, 2007.

⁵⁸ Bhabha 126.

one,” Lil’ Wayne highlights the importance of Birdman’s mentorship, guidance, and belief in his ability when many doubted his capacity. Lil’ Wayne makes clear that he shares his success with Birdman as an acknowledgment of all he has done on his behalf, and we can see that the nature of their relationship is an intimate one. In validating the kiss between himself and Birdman, the importance of Lil’ Wayne’s role in subverting typified standards of masculinity becomes apparent. Rather than retreating and defending the kiss, Lil’ Wayne affirms the importance of that act as a means of acknowledging the special nature of his relationship with Birdman. In utilizing the intimate act of kissing as a means of affirming relationships between men, Lil’ Wayne is including an act within the boundaries of culturally acceptable hip-hop masculinity, one that has the ability to destabilize its violent and oppressive construction.

Further rupturing the foundation of hip-hop masculinity was Lil’ Wayne’s participation in an advertising campaign for the Strapped condom company. While many hip-hop artists endorse the Strapped condom brand, Lil’ Wayne’s representation in the marketing strategy disrupts the boundaries of acceptable masculinity within hip-hop. In a 2008 ad campaign, Lil’ Wayne is pictured bent over the hood of a cop car with a police officer standing directly behind him handcuffing him, with the campaign slogan, “Go Down Strapped,” written under this depiction (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Strapped Condom Company 2008 Advertising Campaign.
*Lil’ Wayne is depicted being handcuffed by a police officer.*⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Strapped Condom Company, advertisement, 23 Oct. 2009 <<http://www.strappedcondoms.com/>>.

Playing with notions of police brutality, the advertisement draws attention to the adversarial relationship between the hip-hop community, largely comprised of youth of color, and law enforcement, known to disproportionately criminalize and harass this demographic. In hip-hop vernacular, the term *strapped* is typically used to denote one's possession of a firearm, and the advertisement is intended to be a play on words: when faced with the prospect of being arrested, make sure that you go down *strapped*, with the Strapped condom replacing the presence of a gun. What the campaign failed to realize was the homosexual undertone of the depiction of Lil' Wayne when the word *strapped* is utilized in a sexual sense. *Strapped* is often employed to signify male use of a condom during intercourse. With this definition in mind, the advertisement garners an entirely new meaning. The slogan, "Go Down Strapped" can now refer to a homosexual erotic encounter between the police officer and Lil' Wayne. With the police officer standing directly behind Lil' Wayne, the implication is that if a man must "go down" (bend over) and engage in a same-sex erotic encounter, the protection of Strapped condoms is recommended. Though the Strapped condom company immediately pulled the advertisement after receiving backlash from the hip-hop community about the homosexual undertone of the ad, the intention of Lil' Wayne or the condom company is inconsequential to the liberatory possibilities of the advertisement. Being that Freud articulates the process of melancholy to be an unconscious and pathological internalization of loss, the performance and expression of that loss is not recognized by the mourner.

Emblematic of Lil' Wayne's complex and unconscious reconfiguration of hip-hop masculinity and homophobia are comments from the 2009 documentary about the rap star, entitled *The Carter*. In an interview in the film, Lil' Wayne is asked to characterize his life as a rap superstar. The following is an excerpt from the conversation:

Interviewee: Is it sex, rock and rap or rock and roll? Is false or true?

Lil' Wayne: It's um... Sex, rock and rap? Nah, I don't have sex. I don't have time for that shit. I work too much. It's just music, music, music and money for me literally.⁶⁰

Despite being ensconced within a capitalist schema of production and endless pursuit of wealth, Lil' Wayne challenges and disrupts the masculine prerogative of colonial authority by rejecting a crucial piece of hip-hop masculinity: the subjugation of women by means of sexual conquest and control. In this gesture, Lil' Wayne can be seen as unconsciously "exploding" hip-hop masculinity from within its confines, using the tools afforded to him by capitalism.

⁶⁰ *The Carter*, dir. Adam Bhala Lough, Virgil Films and Entertainment, 2009.

This erasure of women and belittling of the possibility of any heterosexual erotic engagement is a radical manifestation of the heterosexual melancholy that characterizes hip-hop culture. Though Lil' Wayne is not a concrete answer toward a progressive hip-hop future, he is undoubtedly a harbinger of a more complex masculine politique being developed within hip-hop culture that is able to undermine hip-hop masculinity from within, not outside, its construction.

Lost Desire

Much of the discourse surrounding the relationship between homosexuality and hip-hop has focused on inclusivity and tolerance, fighting for a cultural space that can accept and respect the perspectives offered by the LGBTQ community. Yet what this approach fails to recognize, as the aforementioned Caushun exemplifies, is that hip-hop is a culture in which success and respect are inherently linked to the notion of authenticity as it relates to "masculinity in its most patriarchal significations."⁶¹ As a colonial force, capitalism has instituted violent masculinity and homophobia as a cultural standard, privileging artists whose narratives embody this ideology and making success for those outside of it nearly impossible.

As with any binary opposition, hip-hop privileges one narrative leaving the other to be subordinated. In the case of hip-hop, heterosexuality and masculinity are celebrated and homosexuality and femininity are denigrated throughout its cultural discourse. Jacques Derrida explains that these oppositions garner their meaning from one another, being "governed by the distinction [of] either/or" serving to "establish conceptual order" by way of organizing "objects, events and relations of the world."⁶² Problematic to these binaries are entities that reside in-between or outside the constructions of these oppositional poles. Entities that do not fit within these structures disrupt their construction, resulting in a "horror of indeterminacy" that threatens to undermine their very existence.⁶³ It is in the gesture of exploiting and exposing these areas of uncertainty that the plausibility of a cultural shift can become reality.

The institution of a violent masculinity within hip-hop is coupled with its strict narrative associating respect in the culture with heterosexuality and masculinity. The example of Caushun shows that his sexual orientation left his voice coded as inferior, disallowing any meaningful impact on a redirection of hip-hop cultural standards. Lil' Wayne offers the uncertainty that Derrida highlights, and he provides the basis for a radical disruption and realign-

⁶¹ Johnson 218.

⁶² Jeff Collins and Bill Mayblin, *Introducing Derrida* (New York: Totem Books, 2006) 20.

⁶³ Collins and Mayblin 21.

ment of masculine standards within hip-hop culture. His willingness to play with the boundaries of sexuality while reaffirming his masculinity with an ethos that is conducive to capitalist reproduction allows for the disruption of simple oppositional binaries that stifle artistic expression within hip-hop. This uncertainty is the “slippage and excess” Bhabha refers to in his theory on mimicry, and in the case of hip-hop allows for a liberatory sexual politique to surface within a seemingly repressive capitalist apparatus.

Re-articulating the nature of hip-hop’s violent relationship with homosexuality provides an alternative framework within which homophobia can be challenged and eradicated. Recognition of the homosexuality embedded within the culture serves as a powerful analytical tool through which the melancholic longing typified by much of hip-hop culture can begin to subside. Clearly, the gay hip-hop movement has offered powerful critiques of the contemporary construction of hip-hop masculinity and serves as a valuable tool in bringing about a more progressive hip-hop culture. Yet, the discourse within hip-hop as it stands must be examined to unearth the desire and frustrations that have been masked by capitalism. With this knowledge in hand, hip-hop masculinity can be upended using the tools of its oppressive economic system and the genre can move towards a more complex articulation of sexuality within its culture.

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